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WASHINGTON D.C. -- The Kazakh government reportedly soon will try two activists for their religious freedom-related activities. Atheist blogger Aleksandr Kharlamov, 63, had been held for four months in a psychiatric hospital and remains imprisoned allegedly for "inciting religious hatred." Bakhytzhan Kashkumbaev, 66, who leads the Grace Church in the Kazakh capital of Astana was arrested in May 2013 allegedly for "intentionally inflicting serious harm to health."

"Kazakhstan, once a leader in Central Asia on freedom of religion or belief, is a leader no more," said Robert P. George, Chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). "These two cases, along with the harsh application of highly restrictive laws adopted two years ago, have damaged Kazakhstan's international standing and have resulted in many Kazakh citizens' religious freedoms being violated."

After three months in psychiatric detention and prison, Kharlamov faces trial in the city of Ridder in the East Kazakhstan Region. He was arrested on March 14, 2013, after "expert analysis" found that 28 of 36 of his writings "have negative information aimed at inciting religious hatred and discord." Kazakh human rights advocates deny these allegations. Kharlamov faces a possible seven-year prison term, and reportedly has lost 44 pounds since his imprisonment.

The criminal case brought against Pastor Kashkumbaev in October 2012 was "for causing considerable harm to the psychological health" of a church member. This charge carries a possible prison term of between three to seven years. A possible motive for the pastor's arrest is that he is an ethnic Kazakh – as is the majority of his congregation. He was arrested in May 2013 and is in pre-trial detention until August 17, 2013. He will be sent to Almaty for psychiatric evaluation; he is now fasting to protest his treatment. Criminal charges are pending and his trial will begin soon.

"Kazakh President Nazarbayev promotes his country's record of religious tolerance, but the Kashkumbaev and Kharlamov cases reveal a different truth," USCIRF Chair George stated. "The use of forcible psychiatric exams is reminiscent of the worst methods that the Soviets used against dissidents. Both these men should be released immediately and all charges against them dropped."

In its 2013 Annual Report, USCIRF detailed a decline in religious freedom protections in Kazakhstan over the past five years. The Kazakh government has enforced its 2011 religion law's ban on unregistered religious activity, through police raids, detentions, and major fines. The law's onerous registration requirements have also led to a sharp drop in the number of registered religious groups, both Muslim and Protestant. Due to such concerns, USCIRF for the first time has placed Kazakhstan on its Tier 2 list of those countries where religious freedom restrictions are on the threshold of those of a Country of Particular Concern.